

Editorial

Parting shots

Five years at the helm of the Journal went by like a summer vacation. I tried to write the classic final editorial, part nostalgia, part pearls of wisdom, but came up empty. Doing something for years does not necessarily make you an expert on how it should be done (maybe that is wisdom enough). So I decided to take a break, and invite you to do the same. Let's play!

Celebrity quiz

When you write and talk about quality, you have to drop names. This game consists in placing the name of a famous quality expert or organization, or a quality-related acronym, into the answer to each question. Silliness, free association, and/or slurred pronunciation are required. For instance, to the question 'What do you call a succession of imperial quality experts?', the suggested answer is "Deming dynasty", in homage to William Edwards Deming and to the Ming dynasty. Your turn (answers at the end of the editorial):

- (1) What is the name of a 1980s' pop group composed of quality experts?
- (2) What do you call the strict application of quality principles?
- (3) What is a major breakthrough in patient safety?
- (4) What can stop a quality improvement expert?
- (5) What does a safety expert bring along on a fishing trip?
- (6) How do some medical errors occur?
- (7) What do you call a quality circle of plumbers?
- (8) How does a safety expert sign his impressionist paintings?
- (9) What do you call a really scary quality expert?
- (10) What results from repeated quality deficiencies?
- (11) What principle guides hospital accreditation visits?
- (12) What do you call a patient survey that shows 95% satisfaction?
- (13) What is the prediction of zero complications in intensive care?
- (14) What is the favourite music style among quality policy experts?
- (15) What is the public release of quality indicators?
- (16) What did God of quality say to Noah?

Why abbreviations and acronyms are wrong

My pet peeve as editor is asking authors to remove abbreviations and acronyms from an otherwise fine manuscript. Here are the top reasons why:

7. Abbreviations and acronyms smack of laziness. One imagines the author thinking 'I cannot be bothered to type out yet again the most important words of my manuscript'.
6. They spoil reading pleasure. Even silent reading is an auditory experience. One can appreciate the rhythm of a good sentence, enjoy the preschool staccato of 'plan-do-check-act', or shudder at the hissing of 'six sigma'. Try that with PDCA or 6σ.
5. They tax short-term memory. As a rule I promptly forget what a new abbreviation means, and have to look it up repeatedly. Life is too short.
4. They are parochial. E.g., PCP means 'primary care provider' to a general practitioner, '*Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia' to an infectious disease consultant, 'phen-cyclidine', or angel dust, to an addiction specialist, and 'process control plan' to a quality manager. We have enough trouble communicating between disciplines as it is. And gee, I wonder if abbreviations hamper communication with non-native speakers of English.
3. They are oppressive. Common words belong to all, but acronyms and abbreviations create two classes of people: those who assign meaning (authors), and those who follow instructions (readers). No need for Humpty Dumpty to tell us which is to be master. It is not a coincidence that acronyms thrive in armies, governments, and bureaucracies.
2. They will trip you up even when you think you are on safe ground. Is QI a quality indicator, quality improvement, quality initiative, quality inspection, or quality intervention? Qualitative inference, anyone?
1. They impede thinking. Our big ape brains are much better at dealing with familiar concepts than at manipulating arbitrary symbols. Consider the classic Wason selection task (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wason_selection_task): people easily grasp that the logical rule 'if A then B' is contradicted by 'A and not(B)' when the propositions are expressed in familiar terms (such as 'if a person is underage then the drink must be non-alcoholic'), but are hopeless when the propositions are arbitrary (such as 'if the letter is a consonant, then the number must be even'). Acronyms and abbreviations are such arbitrary symbols; they muddle our brains.

The solution: write as you would speak if you were to deliver a plenary lecture to an educated but non-specialised audience.

Quality riddles

Quality professionals use a good deal of jargon, and sometimes forget alternative meanings of common words. Resolve each of the clues, as you would in a cross-word puzzle, to come up with the answer (solutions at the end of the Editorial).

Example: A conceptual framework for quality assessment:

- It is visible on the Eiffel tower (structure)
- Bony outgrowth (process)
- Result of spending your income? (outcome)

17. Central principle of quality improvement

- Before B, an alternative
- Afro, for example
- A quick one has good memory
- When you are caught in it, you are caught

18. School of thought in quality improvement:

- Destroy
- Kind of time you spend with your family
- Anger and waste can be subjected to it

19. An important label in quality certification:

- What a bull, a storm, and a needle have in common

- Double curve
- To be indebted
- Number on a Swedish car

20. A method for understanding the occurrence of incidents

- People do that for the home team
- Sometimes noble, other times lost
- One talks, the other listens

21. Your favourite reading material?

- Either that, or cremate
- Ballplayer from Washington
- Log
- Because
- Hotel chain
- Some organisations maintain it
- Give a hoot

Editor's haiku

Thumbs up red ink stet
Ghosts of authors never seen
What's your conclusion

(15) HEDISclosure

(16) NICE AHRQ

Answers

Celebrity quiz

- (1) Juran Juran
- (2) Donabedience
- (3) A quantum Leape (apologies to Lucian)
- (4) A Berwick wall (apologies to Don)
- (5) Tackle and Bates (apologies to David)
- (6) Without rhyme or Reason (apologies to James)
- (7) The Joints Commission
- (8) Vincent (apologies to Charles)
- (9) Chassin the dragon (apologies to Mark)
- (10) Lohr expectations (apologies to Kathleen)
- (11) Shaw and tell (apologies to Charles)
- (12) A Picker-me-up (alternative: a feather in your CAHPS)
- (13) Pronovostication (apologies to Peter)
- (14) Leatherm'n'blues (apologies to Sheila)

Quality riddles

17. Plan, do, study, act
18. Total, quality, management
19. Eye, ess, owe, 9000 (ISO 9000)
20. Root, cause, analysis
21. Inter, National, journal, for, Quality Inn, health, care

Thomas Perneger
Outgoing Journal Editor
Division of clinical epidemiology
University hospitals of Geneva
University of Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland
E-mail: eic-ijqhc@hcuge.ch